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HIGH EXPECTATIONS REQUIRE
SUPPORTING NEW TEACHERS,

Educating the School Community

By Heidi M. MacGlaughlin and Donna M. Mertens

"The principal gave me the list of my students' names and the location of my classroom and then 'washed his hands' of me. He did not require me to submit weekly plans like other teachers, and my students and I were not invited to Field Day or even to assemblies. From the beginning it was clear: I'd 'only' be teaching in sign language, and I was on my own."

The quotation above is adapted from the remarks of a recent graduate of the master's program at Gallaudet University, who began teaching students who were deaf and had an additional disability in a public school—and who was astounded at the attitudes and practices she confronted there. She was simply not prepared for the low expectations communicated by the principal or the exclusionary practices she and her students faced in the school community.

A study at Gallaudet University revealed that she was not alone, either in facing such practices or in feeling unprepared to face them. The study showed one of the biggest challenges teachers of deaf students and deaf students with disabilities face is marginalization within their schools and programs. Teacher education programs do not present sufficient information for teachers about students with disabilities or for special education teachers about strategies to work effectively with deaf students (Borders & Bock, 2012), nor do teacher education programs prepare those who will teach these students for the reality of the lack of understanding and indifference that they will face from their educator peers.

It is a reality that has negative effects for the teachers, and, perhaps more importantly, for their students. Maintaining high expectations in the classroom is not simply a matter of

Photo by John T. Consoli



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teacher training and individual disposition. It is much more complicated. The expectations of school administrators, other teachers, and even other students factor into the achievement of students (Mertens, Holmes, Harris, & Brandt, 2007). Further, parental expectations are critical (Marschark and Hauser, 2012). All of these factors make an already complex situation even more complicated.

The evidence of discrimination and marginalization is daunting. As one young teacher noted:

“Teachers in the mainstream resist our [deaf and hard of hearing] students, especially [deaf] students with multiple disabilities.”

Still another new graduate wrote:

“Although my students … go to other [teachers’] classes, [these] teachers view me as responsible for my students’ behavior and discipline throughout the day. For instance, if my students misbehave, other teachers come and

tell me to do this or that. I tell them that they have every right to discipline the students themselves. Why come to me? What message does that send to regular students? That we’re not one of them? It’s frustrating.”

These challenges are not present only in public schools and mainstream settings. One teacher from a residential school for deaf students remarked on the same phenomenon. “It’s almost like the multiple disabilities/special needs section is totally separate, an island opposed to the regular deaf school. I hate the separation. I’ve worked there two years, and many teachers at the regular deaf school building look at me as if I’m a visitor,” she said.

One of our graduates noted that while preschool classes tend to integrate students with disabilities successfully, the separation of students who are less traditionally abled begins in the early grades. “Elementary teachers in regular education classes turn up their noses at us,” the graduate remarked. “High school kids

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are separated, and their teachers have very negative attitudes about our kids.... Their students internalize this and pick on special needs and disabled students. [The attitude is] 'What's wrong with them?'

These experiences are painful, and they can be demoralizing. How can young teachers be expected to maintain strong expectations for their students when they find their classes and their work—in fact, often their professional selves—being constantly diminished and devalued? How can they provide opportunities for their students when the message that they and their students confront daily from all those around them is one of irrelevance? What message does it send to students and teachers when the achievement of students is meaningless to the rest of the school?

As one of teacher remarked, "We need to coordinate to have equality." This coordination can begin in teacher education programs.

Teaching Advocacy in the Face of Low Expectations

The teachers in our study suggested that teacher education programs begin addressing the environment that soon-to-graduate teachers will face—and teach these new graduates advocacy skills. By being prepared for the low expectations and negative attitudes of many in the professional community, new teachers would be better able to advocate for appropriate inclusion. As one recent graduate remarked: "I'd like to see more general education teachers have information about special education students. I would like mainstream students not to look down on students with disabilities. I'd like them to learn to be more accepting." The graduate went on to speculate that inter-school socializing and participation in athletics might be venues in which deaf students and students with disabilities could be included. The complexity of this issue, however, seems to call for providing ongoing support for

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new teachers through access to advocacy networks and experienced teachers.

Mentoring—pairing new teachers one-on-one with experienced teachers—may be especially helpful. Experienced teachers can support the new teachers and perhaps meaningfully assist with problems, including negative perceptions of other teachers. After graduation, only 47 percent of beginning teachers in the Gallaudet study had a mentor (Mertens et al., 2007). Further, finding the right mentor was not easy, as this graduate explained: "They [wanted to give] me a mentor but they couldn't figure out who.... After several months, they finally gave me someone at my school, but she was not a good fit. If I'd had a mentor from Gallaudet, even if it was a second-year teacher from Gallaudet who could have been my mentor, that would have been better."

One faculty member in a teacher education program agreed that having a

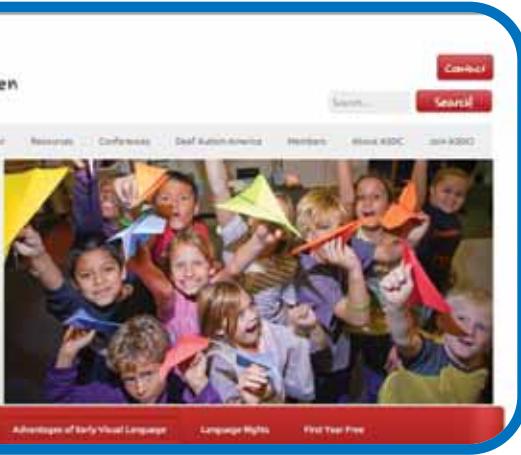
mentor and ongoing support network was important. "I would have liked to see a mentoring-type relationship that would pair [new graduates] with a teacher the first year and develop a mentorship. That would really help, especially for the first year of teaching. That would have been another piece that would have been really nice. The [teacher education graduates] need to be able to remain in contact with each other.... We should also teach them that it is their responsibility to mentor younger teachers."

When flesh and blood mentoring is impossible, the Internet offers ways to provide information and support. University programs can set up chat rooms or discussion boards where new teachers have access to other new teachers, more experienced teachers, and university faculty. Teachers can use technology to discuss issues with other professionals throughout the country, raising issues around the low expectations and marginalization of their programs. They can also access ideas for materials, resources, and strategies, and ways to help them advocate for their students.

Resources include publications that concern inclusion strategies for deaf students with additional disabilities, staff/professional developments, trainings, and community/parent meetings. Organizations that have resources for parents and school communities for advocacy activities for deaf students include the following. Search these sites using the word "advocacy" and many resources will appear.

- **Hands & Voices** (www.handsandvoices.org)—An advocacy organization that emphasizes the individuality of each child and the parents' right to decide communication methods, Hands & Voices produces a guide, *RAdvocacy and the New Vocabulary of*





Power (Seaver, 2002), and a short paper on communication with children whom they call “deaf plus,” meaning deaf children who have additional conditions (Beams, no date).

- **Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, Gallaudet University**

(<http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu>)—The Clerc Center offers various materials to help new teachers of deaf and hard of hearing children, including the 20 to 50 percent who have accompanying disabilities, with material that can be downloaded for free from its website, such as *Creating a Multicultural School Climate for Deaf Children and Their Families* (Sass-Lehrer, Gerner de Garcia, & Rovins, 1997). Also offered is the recently-launched Deaf Students with Disabilities Network, a free, interactive network that provides families and professionals with resources related to deaf and hard of hearing students with additional disabilities.

- **American Society for Deaf Children (ASDC)**
(www.deafchildren.org)—Perhaps the oldest advocacy organization for parents of deaf and hard of hearing children, ASDC publishes *The Endeavor*, a magazine geared toward parents of deaf and hard of hearing children, and *Autism in Deaf Children* by Dr. Ann Moxley, a PDF file that can be downloaded for free (check under “Resources”).

- **Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans** (www.mncdbb.org)—

This state organization seems to be the only one of its kind, and it lists a multitude of resources.

- **Educational Resource Center on Deafness**

(www.info.texasdbbresources.org)— Located in Texas, this website has a myriad of resources available.

Positive experiences in schools for new graduates do occur. One student in the master’s program who did an internship in a public school reported that the experience was a constructive one. “The internship … taught me to feel ‘I can do it,’” she remarked. “It was very welcoming. Everyone … was supportive and willing to help.”

Raising expectations for deaf students, especially those with a disability, is a multi-faceted challenge. As members of

a community of educators, we need to help our newest teachers face environments that are not always supportive. We have to give them the tools they need to advocate for themselves and for their students within their school communities. As one graduate of the teacher education program at Gallaudet summed up: We need our young graduates to teach administrators, other teachers, and students that “the whole school needs to take responsibility of taking care of everyone.”

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